

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

CHALMERS JOHNSON, *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2006, 354 p., index.

This is the final volume of a trilogy “that deals with the way arrogant and misguided American policies have headed us for a series of catastrophes comparable to our disgrace and defeat in Vietnam or even to the sort of extinction that befell our former fellow ‘superpower,’ the Soviet Union” (1). Such a fate, Chalmers Johnson continues, “is probably by now unavoidable ... certainly too late for mere scattered reforms.” Johnson, who was originally known as the foremost expert on Japanese society in the United States, was prescient enough to write *Blowback*, the first volume of his trilogy well before 9/11. He was convinced that secret U.S. government operations and acts around the globe would come back to haunt the nation. The CIA term “blowback” means retaliation for covert, illegal actions. In Johnson’s view, one aspect of blowback is large-scale anti-American terrorist actions, notably 9/11, and the growing popular hostility around the globe to its aggressive foreign policies.

Although the initial book did not make much impact before 9/11, its suggestion that covert actions might be coming back to haunt the United States took on new significance after that fateful day, thrusting Johnson into prominence and leading to an “inadvertent trilogy,” *The American Empire Project*. In the second volume, *The Sorrows of Empire*, the focus is placed on the United States’ global empire of military bases and vast expenditures on private servicing contractors. *Nemesis* is more broad, its fundamental purpose being to prove that the balances framed within the U.S. constitution have been irretrievably lost. What worries Johnson is that behind the undermining of the constitution lays not just the growth of the U.S. global empire, but a growing body of literature that interprets both past and present empires through rosy prisms. He singles out the British historian Niall Ferguson for his efforts to link the United States as the heir to a predominantly benevolent British Empire. Our own Michael Ignatieff, notes Johnson, became post 9/11 the “self-appointed spokesman for humanitarian imperialism” and once back in Toronto acknowledged that his many essays and op-eds had been written as if he were an American. At least Ignatieff issued a mea culpa in *The New York Times Magazine* (August 5, 2007) for his initial support of the Iraq invasion.

Claims for the benevolence of empires are largely spin. They may sometimes bring a measure of peace and stability, but they serve their masters. In *Nemesis* the questions revolve around four issues. First, is it

evident that the American Republic is in peril, and for the reasons stated by Johnson? Second, did the Roman Republic fall in the face of imperium and is there really any parallel between its fall and the likely fate of the American Republic? Third, what can be learned from the British experience with empire? Fourth, is Johnson's gloomy prognosis for America's fate inevitable? The book includes chapters devoted to "comparative imperial pathologies": the CIA perceived as the President's private army, U.S. bases in other people's countries, the impact of American forces in Japan, space as the ultimate imperialist project, and a concluding chapter on the crisis of the American Republic.

One must conclude that many of America's foreign (and some domestic) policies over the past fifty years have increasingly undermined the constitutional checks and balances established by the Founding Fathers to prevent tyrannical government. The impact of 9/11 has been to increase exponentially the impact of such policies under the jurisdiction of an Executive that through various administrative subterfuges has been able to maintain, and increase, vast military expenditures, often without the direct involvement of Congress. Such expenditures have, in turn, been used to expand the boundaries of the U.S. empire both geographically and through Space Wars initiatives. They have also through Homeland Security been used to restrict basic freedoms at home, although this is by no means just an American development. Perhaps the most sinister element undermining the U.S. constitutional balance is the ample evidence that the CIA has, in essence, become the President's "private army," officially accountable to no other branch of government. As Johnson notes, "the president's untrammelled control of the CIA is probably the single most extraordinary power the imperial presidency possesses – totally beyond the balance of powers intended to protect the United States from the rise of a tyrant" (91).

These trends are not new, aside from the unprecedented peacetime restrictions on basic internal freedoms in the name of security. It is important to stress, therefore, that Nemesis consistently takes an historical overview; for example, tracing CIA clandestine activities over the past forty years, including the overthrow of the Allende regime in Chile and its support for Operation Condor which allowed right-wing thugs to kill 13,000 people in six Latin-American countries in the 1970s and 1980s. Likewise, the history of Missile Defence Shield Policies constitutes one of the most significant chapters in this book, not least because the immense cost to American taxpayers – possibly \$1.2 trillion by 2015 – is shown by Johnson to be an enormous and useless boondoggle, involving corruption on a vast scale, against the miniscule prospect of a missile attack from North Korea or Iran. But whatever the historical trends, one cannot ignore that the Bush regime, supported until recently by a subservient Congress, a wavering judiciary and a largely co-opted media (and backed by its own version of God's will), has speeded the constitutional rout.

Before turning to the historical parallels, we need to look more closely at the "administrative subterfuges," which have allowed all such threats to the U.S. constitution to take place. Three of them predominate. First, there are

“black budget” items that are excluded from consideration by Congress. These include the budget of the CIA, and 40% of the Pentagon’s budget. They are totally hidden from the public and all except a few privileged members of Congress and businessmen. Then there are “earmarks” which Johnson notes are “a euphemism that refers to the power of the Congress to insert into appropriations bills funds for special projects which the executive branch has not asked for and that are often not in the nation’s best interest” (114). In 1998, the approximately 2000 earmarks slipped into all 13 appropriations bills had an overall value of \$10.6 billion. By 2004, there were 15,584 earmarks worth \$32.4 billion. Much of this money goes on defence contracts that provide local employment, thereby reducing the willingness of members of Congress to criticize the nation’s huge military budgets. Combined with the proliferation of lobbyists in Washington – 65 for each member of Congress at last count – Johnson leaves the impression that political morality in the United States has drowned under a flood of military and corporate special-interest expenditures.

The third subterfuge, which is the worst, is President Bush’s use of “signing statements.” He issued 505 during his first term alone. These are extra-constitutional challenges to various pieces of legislation which have been enacted by Congress, but which the President reserves the right not to put into practice. Tragically, they have been used in the “war on terrorism” to permit rendition and torture (though never called that) without fear of domestic prosecution. Thus a signing statement was used to gut Senator John McCain’s anti-torture amendment, the Detainee Treatment Act of 2005. And they permit the disgrace of Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay in Cuba; the thousands of CIA rendition flights of people like Maher Arar to torture centres with the complicity of such democratic nations as Germany and Sweden and, sadly, Canada. None would have been possible without executive approval. Johnson calls Arar’s treatment a “disgraceful incident” but notes one telling fact: the registration number of the CIA plane which flew Arar to Syria was photographed by plane-spotters in Afghanistan at an earlier date. Following the exposure of the Arar case, its registration number was changed. But the flights continued. In addition, military expenditures have reached such vast sums that they have created a war economy and pressure for constant imperial expansion. Johnson calls the latter “military Keynesianism,” using a phrase first adopted to explain Nazi Germany’s success in utilizing military expenditures to overcome the Great Depression; and notes that it short-circuits John Maynard Keynes’ argument that “pump-primer” spending should cease with full employment, by becoming a permanent institution whose “pump” must always be primed.

Let us pause here and jump back over 2000 years. Replace Bush with Augustus Caesar, the CIA with the Praetorian Guard, the subservient Republican Congress (now turned Democrat) with the subservient Roman Senate, and the U.S. military with the legions. Is the government of the early Roman Empire an eerie reflection of the federal government of the United States? In some measure it is, but Johnson is arguing that Roman imperial expansion led to the end of the Republic rather than the subsequent imperial government. Here he is on more shaky ground. The

constitution of the Roman Republic failed to change from its archaic formula of layered structures of elected institutions. These paralysed each other with vetoes, all of which impeded state business but nonetheless allowed talented thugs to expand Rome's territories abroad, massacre their opponents at home, and bring the Republic into disrepute. Both Julius Caesar and Augustus realised that the Republic was irreparably flawed, and even if their actions in bringing it down had a strong element of self-interest, they were not without logic. Johnson is right that after Augustus not much recommends the Roman Empire as an example of enlightened government. But it is pushing things too far to say that "the United States today, like the Roman Republic in the first century BC, is threatened by an out-of-control military-industrial complex and a huge secret government controlled exclusively by the president" (89).

Not surprisingly, Johnson considers the British Empire to have been an exploitative enterprise, and the involvement of the British military in the Suez episode and in Iraq an atavistic revisiting of old dreams. In his view, the main lesson to be learned from the British Empire is that a democracy at home which maintains "a tyranny" abroad can ultimately survive as a democracy only if in the face of increasingly hostile public opinion, it gives up on empire. The alternative would be "domestic tyranny" and, says Johnson, Britain only escaped this because of a resurgence of democracy following World War II. Regrettably, this argument, even more than the Roman comparison, shows one weakness in a remarkable book: a tendency to draw sweeping historical parallels and pepper them with value-judgements. For example, the predominantly white-settler dominions were part of the British Empire, but however badly they may have treated their indigenous peoples, were their political systems "tyrannies?" Suppose that Winston Churchill and the Conservatives had been re-elected towards the end of the War rather than the Labour Party, can one honestly believe that his fanatical desire to hold on to India would have led him to support a domestic version of the Nazi tyranny which he had so long fought against? I do not think so.

None of this means, of course, that the United States does not face the danger of domestic tyranny. Johnson believes that it does because "to maintain our empire abroad requires resources and commitments that will inevitably undercut our domestic democracy and in the end produce a military dictatorship or its civilian equivalent" (278). A formal military dictatorship is seen as unlikely, but the U.S. is on the cusp of an imperial presidency. In order to keep the empire, the blowback dynamics, which apply to all empires, come into play: "isolation, the uniting of forces opposed to imperialism, and bankruptcy. Nemesis stalks our life as a free nation" (279). So the only answer, as with Britain, is to give up on empire. He is correct in principle, but it is typical of this genre of critique of American policies that Johnson does not really say how this might be accomplished. The Democrats now hold Congress. Within a couple of years, barring some very unconstitutional shenanigans, there will be a Democratic President. Ultimately, U.S. and British troops may leave Iraq, but will their governments be willing to evacuate facilities on which they have spent literally billions of dollars? Even under a Democratic executive,

can the huge military defence expenditures be turned towards repairing a decaying civil infrastructure and to health reforms, in the face of their embedding in the American economy? The questions abound. Despite Johnson's gloomy thumbs down on "scattered reforms," a first step to proving him wrong would be to bring back the rule of law: no more exclusion of the CIA from Congressional oversight, no more extra-constitutional presidential powers over imprisonment and torture, no extension of the powers of Homeland Security each time there is another dubious terrorist alert.

Despite the length of my review, I have not been able to do full justice to this final book in a trilogy which has become a kind of mini-Bible to many critical writers. Notably, the chapter on U.S. military involvement in Japan allows Johnson to show his expertise in Japanese studies. Whilst I criticized his use of historical parallels and generalizations, this is far outweighed by his outstanding capacity to marshal copious facts, figures, and events to support his arguments. Whilst I note that he offers no evident solutions short of abandoning empire, this is because he believes there are none.

For sociologists, the importance of *Nemesis* is that it points out the ease with which a nation that has prided itself for nearly 250 years on its liberties and balance of powers can come so dangerously close to losing them with little of the popular agitation which marked the opposition to the Vietnam War. Even with its limitations of historical comparison, *Nemesis* has elements of interest to historical sociologists insofar as, with all three imperia, it studies the steady corrupting influence of power and the "spin" which makes it possible.

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